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AUTHOR Nikolay, Pauli Bamlett
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ABSTRACT

"Our Young Authors" is a writing project held each spring semester at the Cambridge Elementary-Junior High School (Wisconsin) open to all children in the school. Begun in 1978, the program is thriving, with over 90% of the students having participated in the competition in 1982. Students create their own books according to timelines and guidelines distributed by the school. These guidelines cover format, possible topics, and contest procedures. Classroom teachers choose 5 stories to send on to the judges, for a total of 15 stories at each grade level. Stories are judged for organization, clarity, grammar, transitions, originality, word choice, descriptions, characters, title, length, and neatness. Each entrant receives a certificate of merit, and the authors of the five best stories in each grade level receive a ribbon award presented during a special assembly. Other schools can institute the same program by getting the support of their administrators, finding someone willing to be the project coordinator, and following the rest of the procedures used in this writing project. (JL)

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"OUR YOUNG AUTHORS"

A Writing Program That Really Works!

Pauli Bamlett Nikolay

What Is "Our Young Authors"?

"Our Young Authors" is a writing project, held each spring semester at the Cambridge Elementary-Junior High School. All children, kindergarten through 8th grade, are eligible to enter. Ribbons are awarded for the best stories at each grade level.

This project was begun to stimulate children to write. The fun and excitement created by the project has been contagious. Teachers have incorporated writing into their daily routine throughout the year, and have emphasized both basic and creative writing skills. As a result, both the teachers and the students are enjoying more positive experiences with writing.

The children are exercising their writing skills more regularly. When we realize that a piece of writing is an informative example of a child's thinking, we can easily see how writing can be used to help children think clearly. And when children are encouraged to write about things they care about, we can learn so much about them as individuals, and be more effective helping them grow as individuals.

One feature of this project which has added to its excitement and success has been our use of the Cambridge community. Several local authors spark interest in the project by talking with the children at the beginning of the project and also by judging stories at the end. It is stimulating to the children to hear an outsider's ideas as well as their teacher's ideas.

Another feature essential to the project has been that one person has been willing to be the coordinator. Working with the coordinator are the local authors, the school staff and the students. The project also receives strong support from the school administration. Together everyone's efforts combine to create an exciting and successful project!

Our project was begun in 1978 with many high hopes. Our biggest problem has been the tensions created by competition itself; (this will be discussed further under Awards). But the project not only survives, it thrives. In 1978, 350 of our 625 students wrote a story. This year over 90% of our students wrote a story. Anyone entering the school this spring cannot fail to feel the excitement, and see evidence of much effort: the hallways are decorated with poems and stories as well as pictures. Peek into any classroom, and you will see a room full of kids who think of themselves as Young Authors!

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HANDOUT

TIMELINES and GUIDELINES

Following is a sample copy of the handout that is distributed to each student in our school. After the teacher reviews the guidelines and timelines with the students, they are asked to take the handout home to share with their parents. A copy of this handout is also placed in the local paper so that the community is aware of the project.

start of sample handout

Our students, kindergarten through eighth grade, will soon be involved in a "let's write books" project. This project will hopefully instill more interest in books, writing, and cooperative competition within the students. The beginning date for the project is usually the first day of the second semester and it will be completed by April 14 when we will celebrate National Library Week.

The writing and illustrating of the books is to be done by the students and we ask that parents not assist their children in these areas. The upper grade students will be responsible for their own proofreading and editing while the primary teachers will aide their students in this process. Books will be kept at school and students will have sufficient time to complete them during the regular school day.

Following are the timelines and guidelines set up for the project. Please encourage your child to meet these deadlines as they will be followed closely.

TIMELINES

January 21 - February 29 - During this six week period the actual writing and illustrating of the books will be done. All students must have their final copy completed by February 29 and turned in to the classroom teacher.

Each classroom teacher will then select the 5 best books from his/her class and turn them over to the Selection Committee for their level.

March 3 - March 17 - The Selection Committee will review the 15 books submitted from each grade level and then choose the top 5 books from each level.

Ribbons will be awarded to the authors of the top 5 books selected from each grade level. In case of a tie, duplicate ribbons will be given, in which event more than 5 books may be awarded ribbons.

March 17 - April 11 - During this time the blue and red ribbon books selected will be typed, illustrated again and assembled. There will be two copies of each of these books, one for our IMC and the other for the author.

The author of the blue ribbon book selected at each of the grade levels will have his/her name engraved on a plaque which is on display at our IMC.

April 14 - April 18 - "National Library Week". Student's books will be placed in our IMC with their certificates, ribbons, and the plaque.

We will be doing articles, with pictures, for our local newspaper throughout the project.

Guidelines

1. All students in grades K through 8 will be eligible to participate.
2. All students who enter a book will receive a certificate.
3. Writing will be fiction or non-fiction prose or poetry. These are possible ideas.

Animals
Autobiography
Biography
Careers
Family Life
Folklore, Fables
Sports

Minorities
War Stories
Adventures
Fantasy
Romance
Humorous
Comics

Poetry
How To
Science Fiction
Emotions
Mystery

4. Each book will follow one theme and must be a continuous story rather than a collection of shorter stories.
5. Only poetry books will be accepted as a collection of shorter poems.
6. All books will be based on an original idea.
7. Students will write and illustrate their books by themselves. They are to receive no help in the actual writing or illustrating of their book.
8. Students are eligible to enter only one book in the project.
9. Students will only enter a book which was written during this year's project, not one previously written.
10. Books may be written on whatever interest/reading level the author decides.
11. Books will be written on either lined or unlined paper 8½ x 11 or less. The books will be either rectangular or square in shape. Paper for the final copies is available from the teacher. (Special heavier weight paper is ordered specially for the project.)
12. Books do not need to be illustrated, and will not be selected on the quality of their illustrating.
13. Illustrations will not be placed on lines of the pages of the book.

14. Covers will be made from either construction paper or tag board which is available from the teacher.
15. Each book will contain a title page listing the title, author, school name, grade level, and date.
16. Author's name will not be included on the title page until after the winning books are selected. It is also not to be found anywhere in the text of the story.
17. Books with more than one chapter will include a table of contents.
18. The length of the book will be determined by the author, but should be consistent with his/her abilities.
19. The margins will be 1½ inches on the left side of all pages to allow for binding.
20. Blue and red ribbon books will be typed and assembled for placement in our IMC's by the available aides and staff.
21. Selection Committees will be set up by grade levels, K-2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8. Committees will be made by local authors, administrators, staff members and aides. No one will serve on a committee for their own grade level.

Junior High Students - Since your type of scheduling doesn't allow you the amount of time each day in which to write, the following guidelines have been added for you.

22. You may sign your book out of your English class and work on it during study hall.
23. You may take your book home to work on it if you sign it out with your English teacher.
24. Your book may be a shape other than square or rectangular if another shape is more suitable to your topic.
25. Up to 20 books will be accepted from each junior high grade for judging, rather than 15 as in the other grades.

Since all of the writing and illustrating of the books will be done by the students, we would just like for you to review the timelines and guidelines with your child and encourage him/her to meet them.

We are eager for our project to begin and are excited to see the enthusiasm already displayed by the students. This is intended to be a fun learning experience for all of us and we want to thank you for all of your cooperation. If anyone has any comments or further suggestions, please call the classroom teacher or Pauli Bamlett at the Elementary School, 423-3236.

end of sample handout

JUDGING

Preliminary judging is accomplished by each teacher, who chooses five stories to send on to the judges. In our school this means that there are 15 stories to judge at each grade level.

The stories are judged (grade by grade) by a Selection Committee made up of 4 judges. To simplify, we have only 4 groups of judges: one which judges K-2, one for 3-4, one for 5-6, and one for 7-8. Teachers can sign up to judge at any level except the grade they teach. Each group is made up of 3 or 4 teachers and one author who is the chairperson of that Selection Committee.

The following are the criteria we use in judging:

1. Good organization of the story:
 - An informative beginning, which arouses curiosity or interest
 - An interesting middle
 - A satisfying end
2. Clear sentences
3. Correct grammar
4. Good transitions (the paragraphs should flow easily from one to the next and be well-connected)
5. Originality of idea
6. Imaginative and fresh choice of words
7. Good descriptions, spread evenly throughout the story
8. Well-rounded, believable characters
9. Appropriate title
10. Appropriate length (length should fit subject)
11. Neat, attractive final copy

For poetry:

1. Good sense of rhythm
2. Natural and meaningful rhyme (if rhymed) - (the rhyming should not sound contrived)
3. Imaginative choice of words

4. Concise choice of words
5. Coherent idea
6. And any of the points under stories which would be applicable to poems, probably #2, 3, 5, (6), 9, 10, 11 and maybe 1 and 8

Selection Committee Comments - As each of the members judges a book, they write notes. At the K-2 and 3-4 grade levels, these notes are then compiled into one letter to the student author; at the 5-6 and 7-8 grade levels, each members' notes are given to the student author. These letters/notes discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the books and serve as a vehicle for improving writing and as a motivator for continuing writing. The students always eagerly await these comments.

AWARDS

Each young author receives a certificate of merit to celebrate his/her efforts. Beyond this initial recognition, the authors of the five best stories each receive a ribbon award. In our school we rank the top 5 from 1st place to 5th place and each place is awarded a different colored ribbon. There is flexibility for this in which case duplicate ribbons are awarded. The first two years we gave only 5 ribbons per grade and found we had too many instances of two stories which were equally deserving of a ribbon.

Our biggest problem has been that at a certain grade level one person wins every year because of her exceptional talent. This creates some tension among the classmates of that person since it is nearly impossible for anyone else to win the blue ribbon.

One way to avoid this would be to give 5 blue ribbons at each grade level, rather than ranking the winners. We feel that there is enough value to the ranking, that we continue with our present system.

Another way to deal with this problem would be to give the perennial winner a special award so that another person could win the blue ribbon. We tried this last year and called it the "Winners Circle Award". Essentially this system gives that award whenever one author wins first place two years consecutively. Again, we prefer our present system.

AWARDS ASSEMBLY

There are two assemblies planned during National Library Week in April. One assembly is held for the A.M. kindergarten children and grades 5 through 8. The other assembly is held for the P.M. kindergarten children and grades 1 through 4.

During these assemblies the certificates are awarded, the honorable mention authors are recognized, and the ribbons are presented to the winning authors by the local authors who headed their Selection Committee. The parents of the ribbon winners are always invited to attend the assembly and share in their child's excitement.

These assemblies have always been very positive, friendly affairs, with appreciation for the winners the biggest sentiment, minimizing the possible disappointment of the others. We like to make the assemblies very special affairs, so that the children's enthusiasm is rekindled for next year's project.

23 Steps to a Successful
"Our Young Authors" Project

1. Get the support of your administration.
2. Find someone willing to be the Project Coordinator.
3. Locate local authors to assist in the project -- to serve on the project committee and to work with the students.
4. Write the Guidelines and Timelines for the Criteria for Judging.
5. Hold a school staff meeting to discuss the project and its goals.
6. Order certificates, ribbons, and a plaque.
7. Ask teachers to distribute the Guidelines and Timelines and discuss them with their students.
8. Ask students to take the Guidelines and Timelines home to share with their parents.
9. Distribute judging criteria to teachers and ask them to discuss it with their students.
10. Schedule local authors to talk with each class.
11. Set up the Selection Committee -- Local authors each chair a committee and any staff member may volunteer to serve on a committee.
12. After the students have been writing for 6 weeks, each teacher chooses 5 books from his/her class and submits them to the Selection Committee at that level.
13. The Selection Committee reads the books (usually 15 per grade level) and selects the top 5.
14. The blue and red ribbon winner's books are typed, covers are made and laminated, and the books are spiral bound. (two copies of each book)
15. The blue and red ribbon winners are asked to illustrate the typed copies.
16. The assemblies are scheduled.
17. The plaque with the names of the blue ribbon winners from each grade level is taken to the engraver.

18. The Certificates of Merit are completed.
19. The information on the back of the ribbons is completed.
20. The parents of all the ribbon winners are sent a letter inviting them to the assembly.
21. The assemblies are held.
22. Send a "thank you" to local authors and special helpers.
23. Start thinking about next year!

SUGGESTED MATERIALS

Paper - A.B. Dick
6317 Odana Road
Madison, WI 53719

Red Label Economy Bond
Sub 24 8½ x 11

Certificates - Highsmith Co., Inc.
P. O. Box 25, Hwy 106 East
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

Certificates of Merit
No. 48-129

We have our own personalized certificate printed especially for the project.

Ribbons - Boosters Incorporated
P. O. Box 7156
Montgomery, Alabama 36107

Ribbons - first through fifth place
No. AR 2010

Plaque - Nasco
901 Janesville Avenue
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

Our Industrial Arts Dept. makes ours, with brass purchased from Nasco.

Films - BAVI - University of Wisconsin Extension
Madison, WI

No. 5447 Story of a Book: Pagoo
7250 Serendipity: Find Something to Write About

Films - LaCrosse - University of Wisconsin
Describing What We See
Let's Write a Story

Meet Your Authors CCBC University of Wisconsin, Madison

Carol Ryrle Brink
Life and Times of Laura Ingalls Wilder
The Ideas of Ellen Raskin Become Books

Spiral Spines - Highsmith Co., Inc. (address above)

Binding Machine - Spiral Binding, Inc.
4200 W. Wrightwood Avenue
Chicago, IL 60639

or Highsmith Co., Inc. (address above)